



## Priest

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Last month, the diocese stripped O'Neill of his priestly powers and privileges because of sexual abuse complaints. He can no longer participate in any ministry, wear clerical clothing or reside in parish or diocesan housing.

### A dark privilege

It was considered a privilege to be asked to go on retreat with O'Neill, and usually three to six boys at a time were picked. "It was exciting to be selected, to be able to go on this retreat. Within our parish, it had some religious benefits. It was an opportunity to talk around with friends," said Jim, one of the three accusers in the lawsuit, by phone from Orlando, Fla., where he now lives. He attended St. Basil's School as a youngster.

O'Neill was a charismatic personality who ingratiated himself with adults in the parish, Jim said. Parents trusted him like a member of the family and most did not raise questions about his taking teenage boys on retreats nearly three hours away, in the middle of nowhere. The three men, who weren't with O'Neill at the cottage at the same time, all remembered the priest being a heavy drinker, sometimes staying at a bar near the cottage and supplying alcohol to underage boys. Mars said the night he was molested, O'Neill spiked his Coca-Cola with rum. That cold Thanksgiving night, in 1978 or 1979, Mars was selected from among the other

boys — he doesn't remember why or how — to sleep with O'Neill in his bed, he said. "One of the things he told me was, 'I'm going to show you how soldiers keep warm in the Army,'" Mars said by phone from St. Petersburg, Fla. Mars said he was 14 or 15 at the time and claims he was fondled repeatedly. "I was so scared and petrified, I don't recall trying to pull away. I recall not wanting to make a scene."

The rest of the weekend was a blur, he said, although nothing happened the second night when he was required to sleep with O'Neill again. "I curled up in a ball... and got as close to the wall as possible," he said. Mars didn't mention the incident until three or four years later, when he told his best friend, who had also been at the cottage.

O'Neill never again asked Mars to the cottage, he said. Jim visited the cottage twice before he was chosen to sleep with O'Neill sometime in the winter of 1977, he said. As he tried to sleep, he recalls having to push away O'Neill's groping arm. Jim also called out O'Neill's name, with no response, he said. The priest eventually did remove his hand from Jim's buttocks and genitalia, he said.

"It was my belief he pretended to be sleeping," said Jim. A few minutes later, he said, he felt O'Neill's hand on his buttocks again. Jim then got out of bed, walked out of the cottage and finally came back in and sat on the toilet for the rest of the night, he said.

Adding to his humiliation, Jim was chosen the next morning for

## The Rev. Robert O'Neill

Obituary: June 2, 1962, to June 17, 2002. He is now 65 and retired.

Among his assignments: 1982: Assistant pastor, Holy Trinity of the Blessed Virgin Mary Church, Brockport. 1987: Assistant pastor, Holy Cross Church, Rochester. 1992: Diocesan Tribunal. 1997: Pastor, Church of the Annunciation, Rochester. 1998: Administrator, St. Christopher Church, Chili. 1999: Pastor, St. Christopher Church, Chili. 2001: Diocesan Tribunal.

"Upon confession" with O'Neill, who allegedly dwelled on the topic of masturbation for most of the session.

"The other boys were told to go out and play," said Jim, who is now 41. "He asked some very inappropriate questions — if I masturbated, how many times I masturbated and how it felt."

### Roaming hands'

Masturbation was a common topic of conversation for O'Neill, his accusers say.

Paul, the third man in the lawsuit, remembers visiting the cottage twice, on midweek trips during the summer of 1978. He and his family were members of St. John the Evangelist Church.

Nothing extraordinary happened on the first trip, said Paul. But on the second trip, with two other boys, he said O'Neill requested that they all swim naked in the Chaumont River.

"He said, 'We don't swim in bathing suits around here. We go skinny dipping,'" said Paul, who

is now 36 and lives in Monroe County. O'Neill swam to what appeared to be a sand bar in the middle of the river and encouraged the boys to join him. But when they reached the area, none of the boys could touch the bottom, O'Neill said. They discovered, was standing on a large drum in the deep water, and when the out-of-breath swimmers joined him on the drum, they were met by O'Neill's "roaming hands," said Paul.

"I just pushed away from him and started swimming toward shore," he said. Paul refused to sleep in O'Neill's bedroom, although one of the other boys agreed, he said. He also declined O'Neill's invitation for confession in the woods, where the boys would "masturbate with him" during the confession, said Paul.

The next night, Paul again refused to sleep with O'Neill. While lying in a pull-out bed, he awoke in the middle of the night to discover the blanket removed and O'Neill rubbing his backside, he said. O'Neill quickly returned to his bedroom when Paul became aware of what was happening, he said. The boys returned to O'Neill the next day.

"On the way home, he said several times to all three of us, it was basically a threat — 'Don't tell your parents about any of this. They're not going to believe you,'" said Paul. Paul says he didn't tell anyone until about 10 years ago, when he opened up to his brother. ♪

## Cottage was a frequent retreat

BY JEFF TONASE

CHAUMONT — A couple of miles east of Lake Ontario, the muddy Chaumont River differs near the tops of docks after several days of May rain. A weathered cottage perches on a gentle slope here, overlooking the river about 20 yards away. Decades ago, a Rochester priest allegedly molested boys in the tiny cabin.

The Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester is investigating several complaints of alleged sexual abuse by the Rev. Robert F. O'Neill stemming from the 1970s.

In addition, the Democrat and Chronicle has learned that at least two men claim they were molested in the 1970s when they were teens.

In a telephone interview on Friday, O'Neill said he had been advised by a lawyer not to make any statements regarding accusations of abuse. But he acknowledged that he regularly took teenage boys to the cottage on week-end retreats, during which kids would help with yard work and hike, fish, swim and play cards.

Many priests held similar retreats for youths, and most kids enjoyed the trips, he said. "Times have changed. It's different today and those things aren't done," he said.



The Rev. Robert O'Neill often brought youths from the Rochester area to his cottage by the Chaumont River, near Watertown. He is now trying to sell the property.

O'Neill said he hadn't taken kids to the cottage in a "long time, 10 years probably." He later said he was unsure how many kids it had been.

According to one parent, however, O'Neill was still inviting boys to the cabin as late as 1997.

Sandy McCormack of Chili said O'Neill asked her son, Collin, who was 16 at the time, to visit the cottage. McCormack refused to allow her son to go.

O'Neill, she said, began asking Collin to the cottage almost immediately after he took over as pastor at St. Christopher Church in Chili, where the McCormack family had been active members for several years.

O'Neill knew all of the McCormacks, but when he called their home he would ask only for Collin, said Sandy McCormack, who became unnerved by the considerable attention her son was receiving from the priest. "I

was so uncomfortable with it from the beginning with that invitation to somebody that he hardly knew," she said. At about the same time, O'Neill's newest neighbor on the river, Kirk Taylor, was raising his own concerns privately with his wife, who is now deceased, about the priest and his young guests.

"I'm not surprised. My wife and I talked about it. It looked strange. But she said, 'If you can't prove it, don't start rumors,'" said Taylor, who purchased the cottage next to O'Neill's about six years ago. "He always told me they were kids from his parish or something like that."

Taylor said he hoped the allegations against O'Neill were not true. "He is a heck of a likable person," he said. "He is a pleasant person."

McCormack complained to the diocese about O'Neill in 1997. She received assurances at that time from diocesan officials, who told her that he was instructed to refrain from taking kids to the cottage, she said.

Last month, a "For Sale" sign stood near the cabin. O'Neill's business card, with the diocese logo, was tucked to the door.

O'Neill, who said he still visits the cottage with his dog, Phantom, confirmed he is trying to sell the property. ♪

## Unrelenting lawyer files Rochester suit

BY JEFF TONASE

Depending on whom you ask, Jeffrey Anderson is either a crusader of justice for traumatized victims of clergy abuse or the archbishop bent on destroying the Roman Catholic Church.

For 30 years, the St. Paul, Minn., lawyer has been taking the church to court. And as the sexual abuse scandal continues unfolding nationwide, he is being sought out even more to represent abuse victims.

Anderson has filed at least two dozen cases — from Florida to California — in the past two months.

His latest case targets the Roman Catholic Diocese of Rochester. In it, Anderson argues that the diocese was negligent and committed "fiduciary fraud" by allowing the Rev. Robert O'Neill to continue in parish ministry despite "red flags" indicating that the priest may have been sexually abusing boys.

"They had some knowledge of this priest for as many as 30 years," said Anderson.

The three alleged victims said they contacted the diocese. One of them called in the summer of 2000; the two others called in

2001. In two instances, the alleged victims were told by diocesan officials that he was the first to come forward with an accusation of abuse against O'Neill, the suit said.

Anderson argues in the lawsuit, which does not specify damages, that the diocese concealed information about O'Neill's alleged misconduct, and as a result that "fraud" has three plaintiffs have suffered "great pain of mind and body, shock, emotional distress, embarrassment, loss of self-esteem, disgrace, humiliation and loss of enjoyment of life."

The attorney also argues that the statute of limitations has not expired in this case because of the diocese's "reckless failure to prevent or discover Defendant O'Neill's continuing acts of sexual misconduct."

The case involving O'Neill reminds Anderson of the first time he sued the Catholic church in the early 1970s.

"It's painfully similar to a pot of denial and deception that has pervaded since the first case I took," he said.

In pressing his case in Rochester, Anderson will not use federal racketeering laws traditionally geared toward prosecuting mobsters — a tactic he has attempted in other jurisdictions, Anderson also has named the Vatican in two recent lawsuits.

David Clobesky, national di-

rector of the Survivors Network of those Abused by Priests, or SNAP, said Anderson's aggressive tactics are warranted, considering the church's historical refusal to address the problem of sexual abuse.

"I'm not a lawyer, but if anybody can pull that off legally, it's him," said Clobesky. "Somebody's got to try something new."

With Anderson as his lawyer, Clobesky tried unsuccessfully to sue the Diocese of Jefferson City, Mo., in 1995. His case was dismissed in 1997 when a judge ruled that the statute of limitations had run out.

Nevertheless, Clobesky and other victim view Anderson as nothing less than a courageous pioneer in a long, sometimes humiliating battle against the Catholic church.

"What makes him so good is that he combines sensitivity to our victims with a very shrewd legal mind (and) with incredible persistence," said Clobesky.

There's nobody who comes even close to him in terms of the experience level he has.

Critics say Anderson's efforts to link the Vatican to the abuse scandal in the United States border on the absurd.

"He throws the net so far and wide that he endangers the people he represents," said Patrick Scully, a spokesman for the Catholic League, an independ-

ent, New York City-based organization that advocates on behalf of Catholics and Catholic thought and teaching. "If he's going to say the Catholic Church is like the Mafia, it's not going to have a lot of credibility."

Scully also criticized Anderson for joining a press conference sponsored by Catholics for a Free Choice, which called for the United Nations to downgrade the Holy See's U.N. status.

Scully called Catholics for a Free Choice the "most notorious anti-Catholic group in America," and said that "people should take a good, hard look at what (Anderson) is doing."

Anderson views such criticism as evidence that he's doing his job well.

"The Catholic Church stands alone as masters of denial and deceit," he said.

"They have a circle-the-wagons mentality that is like no other institution."

Each time he won punitive damages against the church, Anderson said he believed the hierarchy would change and crack down on abusive priests. That change still hasn't occurred, hence the reason for the new legal strategies, he said.

"I don't think fundamental change will come until at least one of the bishops hears the

clergy of a priest door behind him," he said. ♪